

Newsletter for Birdwatchers

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NEWSLETTER

FOR BIRDWATCHERS

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Editorial:

Conservation by SPIC

The article by Dr. Miss Rachel Reuben in this issue indicates what industrial houses can do for conservation. As a matter of fact many are doing a great deal, and we must think of sponsoring a competition among several companies in our so called backward areas who have a wonderful opportunity of re-creating old landscapes. Will some of our readers take the initiative and draw up a project? One would have to start by listing the likely contenders and identifying the areas in which they could be involved.

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Bibliophile

We have come to know of a mail order book club which offers to its members a variety of books at discounts ranging from 15 to 40 per cent, occasionally more. Membership is free. For details contact :-

Bibliophile,
Post Box 4538,
L-24 Hauz Khas Enclave,
NEW DELHI - 110 016

Incidentally, the lady who runs it, Miss Jasjit Man Singh, is also a keen birdwatcher.

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Lapwings in Trouble

M.K. Himmatsinhji in his article in this issue, refers to the plight of young Lapwings. There is an interesting letter from Dhanraj Malik about the eggs of yellow-wattled lapwings in his garden in Ahmedabad. He writes: "They are in my garden, but the amazing fact about them is that all the four eggs have got white ants on them. So much so that two eggs were stuck with each other with the mud of the white ants. But still the lapwings sit on them." Let us see if they hatch in the form of Siamese Twins.

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Crane Working Group of the Indian Sub-Continent

The Newsletter of this working group, Vol.2, No.1, has been received from Prakash Gole of the Ecological Society, 1B Abhimanshree Society, Pashan Road, Pune - 411 008. I quote: "Let me now give you the highlights of the 1988 map. This map covers the distribution of over 60,000 cranes which include

55,500 Demoiselle., 4484 Common, 450 Sarus and 37 Siberian. In the next section I am going to tell you how I spotted 264 Blacknecked Cranes (*Grus nigricollis*) in Bhutan, which are also covered by the map. But for the present let us deal with the other 4 species.

The highest number of Demoiselle cranes was recorded in Maharashtra (26,300), followed by Karnatak (13,500), Andhra Pradesh (7,800), M. Pradesh (7,775), Rajasthan (2,725) and Gujerat (461). In normal years Gujerat would have topped the list. Unfortunately for the last 3 years that State was under a spell of drought, so was partially Rajasthan and Haryana. The cranes have therefore, moved south en masse. Surprisingly, I did not come across reports of large-scale crop damage by cranes as I did last year. Large concentrations of these cranes were found between Pune-Solapur, Dharwad-Belgaum, around Medak (A.P.), Shivpuri and Kota. "

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Avifauna of Aligarh Region

A.H. Musavi and A.J. Urfi have produced a useful report on the avifauna of Aligarh, published by the Nature Conservation Society of India attached to Aligarh University. A complete list has been given of the birds of the region in the usual manner. There is a lively foreword by Khushwant Singh in which he writes :-

"I was at one time working as a script-writer in All India Radio. One very hot afternoon, the Director General called a meeting in his office. There was a power breakdown and the atmosphere in the room became stifling. In any case what the Director General was saying was very boring and could barely keep myself awake. Suddenly I heard a plaintive call of a bird. Without realising that I was meant to be listening to the Burra Sahib's words of wisdom, I went to the window to look out for the bird. The Director General was very put out and remarked sarcastically: "Mr. Singh has found something of more interest than our deliberations." I replied: "I have. That was the monsoon bird calling. We should have the rains very soon." Everyone burst out laughing.

The next morning the monsoon burst over Delhi. It was not the cronies of Director General but I who had the last laugh. "

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Bird Sanctuary Taking Shape

The Hindu of May 20th 1988, gives the cheering news that a new Bird Sanctuary is taking shape. This is the Vettekudi-Karavetti reservoir, an irrigation tank fed by the Pullambadi new Kattalai canal system commanding an ayacut of over 1397 hectares with a bund length of 4147 metres. Prof. Danial Wesley and Mr. V.S. Velayudan of the Wildlife Conservation Society of Tiruchirapalli have evidently been responsible for this happy development and a well thought out plan has been presented to the Forest Department for improving the habitat and making it suitable for birds. The reservoir is inhabited by a large number of water birds including several species of duck, Grey Pelican, painted Stork, several species of Kingfishers and Terns and many more.

Study on Pariah Kites

Mr. S.M. Satheesan of the Bombay Natural History Society, is undertaking a study on Pariah Kites (*Milvus migrans govinda*). He would like to gather information on whether a truly wild population of Pariah Kite, independent of man, exists anywhere. If any of our readers know of such a group please inform Mr. Satheesan.

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Articles

The SPIC Flamingos by Dr. R. Reuben, Director, Centre for Research in Medical Entomology, P.B. No.5, Sree Sathya Sai Nagar, Madurai - 625 003

It all began with the Annual Report and Accounts for 1985 for the Southern Petroleum Industries Corporation Ltd. (SPIC) which said :

"January of every year an extraordinary sight greets you at the SPIC plant in Tuticorin. Hundreds of graceful flamingos alight at the lake beside the SPIC plant. They feed, rest and breed there right upto June.

What is really unusual is that this lake has effluent discharged from the fertiliser complex. Generally one associates the word 'pollutant' with industrial waste - not migratory birds.

But SPIC takes ample precautions and treats the effluent before it is discharged into the industrial lagoon. Besides, built-in safeguards and air sample checks are strictly enforced at the plant. All these pollution control methods have proved so successful that flamingos have made the effluent lake their favourite nesting place.

The SPIC, environment protection is not just a promise but a serious commitment. "

One might have dismissed this, except that there was a photograph, indubitably of flamingos, and of what certainly appeared to be nest mounds, in a lagoon in front of the fertiliser complex. So, after calling the PRO at the SPIC plant to make sure the birds were still there, I went to Tuticorin on 10th May 1985, to see for myself. I was taken to the effluent lagoon, and there were, about 375 birds, all *Phoenicopterus roseus*, the Greater Flamingo, feeding in two large groups on either side of a road over a culvert, connecting the two halves of the lagoon. It was a lovely sight, and at first they all appeared to be adults, in pink and scarlet plumage. Then suddenly I saw a pair of juveniles, standing a little apart from the feeding adults; almost as big as the smaller female (?) adults, and a dingy grey-brown with grey faces and beaks, with black tips to the latter. A careful recount revealed ten slender, leggy juveniles in all, which, unlike the adults, which were feeding, spent most of their time standing, with their heads under one wing. There were also six sub-adults, whose plumage had turned white but without any trace of pink, and which still had grey faces and beaks.

There were no signs of "nests" in the position shown in the photograph taken in 1984. At one end of the lagoon there was a group of five or six shallow mud basins, perhaps 2 ft. in diameter and only 4 to 6 ins. above the water surface. On one of these there was a juvenile standing with its head under its wing, with an adult bird sitting next to it, on the ground. Was this a nest, or just a small island? There was no way of knowing whether breeding had taken place here or not. I was told by the PRO that the birds start coming in November, so I arranged to return at the beginning of the next season.

It was in fact only in early February 1987 that I could get back. This time there were fewer birds, only about 100; a poor season I was told. All were adults and there were no nests. The birds were noisier this time, with frequent short altercations between feeding males, with raised scarlet plumes and stabbing movements with their beaks, after which they would return to feeding peacefully. So, flamingos do not breed in the SPIC fertiliser plant complex after all, and the "nests" which were photographed may have "feeding rings", the circular trenches which flamingos make around themselves while probing for micro-organisms in the mud. The young juveniles seen in May could have flown in from elsewhere, perhaps all the way from the Raun of Kutch. Young birds hatching in September-October, the beginning of the breeding season in Kutch, would be 6 months old in April-May, and would be capable of undertaking the long journey to the salt pans of the east coast.

Although the flamingos do not breed in Tuticorin, SPIC can legitimately take pride in attracting them in large numbers each year. The effluent from the plant is treated to remove Cadmium, but it contains ammonia and phosphates, which are discharged into the brackish water lagoon. Presumably this stimulates the growth of algal blooms and plankton on which the birds feed. SPIC has fenced off the area for a bird sanctuary, and since protection is lacking in adjoining salt pans, the flamingos congregate here. Other birds seen were spotbills, garganey teal, stilts, greenshank, common sandpipers and little and Temmincks stints. SPIC employs an Environmental Manager, who took me round the complex, which includes a botanical garden, maintained by a horticulturalist; a reservoir which is spotlessly clean and in which fish are kept to prevent algal growth; underground drainage and a sewage treatment plant. Certainly a model for other industries in the southern region.

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An Account of Birds Seen in my Grounds by M.K. Himmatsinhji, Jubilee Ground, Bhuj, Kutch - 370 001

Redwattled Lapwing (Vanellus indicus)

One pair is permanently resident and attempts to nest and raise a brood with varying amount of success. There is also a single bird, lame in one foot, who keeps to himself. Many years ago, a pair of Redwattled Lapwings laid four eggs on top of my compound wall, and on hatching two chicks fell inside my compound and the third one went over on the other side! Naturally the parent birds were in great distress trying to gather the little ones together, without success, so eventually I helped them out by picking up the two chicks and placing them outside.

Blue Rock Pigeon (*Columba livia*)

Occupying the four wells in the grounds these pigeons hardly ever make an effort to enter my house or any of the other structures, though they sit on the roofs and ledges. For some reason all the pairs present do not seem to breed. They perhaps do not have places suitable for building nests. I have noticed comparatively few juveniles among the adults. There are ledges and niches in the wells, but it appears they are not wide or deep enough to hold the squabs as they grow; and as a result they fall into the wells.

Indian Ring Dove or Collared Turtle Dove (*Streptopelia decaocto*)

This bird is again one of the permanent residents. At times more birds arrive, but they just pass through. A couple of pairs attempt to breed, but are not always successful in their attempt to raise a brood.

Red Turtle Dove (*Streptopelia tranquebarica*)

This handsomely coloured dove comes very rarely into my grounds during the rainy season. The Red Turtle Dove is more prone to seasonal movements than the other two doves in Kutch. I have not noted it in my place in recent years.

Little Brown Dove (*Streptopelia senegalensis*)

More common in my compound than the previous two species. At times, and particularly in this year of acute famine, 20+ birds gather together on the ground and the roads here to feed on grass seeds and bits of the neem seeds broken under foot or crushed under the wheels of vehicles. The Little Brown Dove or Senegal Dove, as it is also called, breeds in my compound. At night they roost in my fruit trees as also on *Prosopis juliflora* trees that are spreading all round, in my grounds as well as outside. Once in a while one of these doves falls prey to the pair of Shikras which are there.

Roseringed Parakeet (*Psittacula krameri*)

Three pairs are in residence in the roof of my house. They are joined by others from outside, specially when the mango fruit ripens. This is the time when fledged young leave their nests. The birds in my roof have not been able to raise a single brood so far. This is perhaps because the eggs are laid at the sloping edge of the iron sheets fixed under the framework on which the tiles rest. Thus the eggs are not properly incubated. I have noticed that during the last decade or so very few parakeet with young come into my garden during the mango season. I think the fall in their number may be due to there being more farms growing fruits now, or they (the parakeet) like some birds, have fallen victims to the pesticides being sprayed on fruit trees.

Pied Crested Cuckoo (*Clemator jacobinus*)

I am not sure whether I could include this cuckoo among the resident birds, for it is only a rains breeding visitor. It is however a bird that, though spending the winter elsewhere, can be included in this list as it breeds

in the sub-continent. I have heard them calling near my grounds, and have observed them perching on trees inside. Not seen or heard recently.

Common Hawk Cuckoo or Brainfever Bird (*Cuculus varius*)

Seen one bird near my house on 23.8.78. This was a record of this cuckoo in Kutch after over a century, its having been recorded by either Dr. F. Stoliczka or A.O. Hume first in 1875-76.

The Cuckoo (*Cuculus canorus*)

Actually this cuckoo should have been called the Hawk Cuckoo for it appears so much like a bird of prey of the Shikra family, that an inexperienced person could easily confuse it with a hawk. The Cuckoo apparently breeds in Kutch and is evidently to some extent resident in the sub-continent. The gonads of some of the specimens collected in this district by Dr. Salim Ali, indicated that these birds were in the process of breeding. The birds seen by me both in my grounds and outside have been silent, and I have never heard them calling. It is essentially a passage migrant.

Koel (*Exudynamys scolopacea*)

Two or three Koel are always there in my garden, their numbers increase from May onwards. The males always outnumber the opposite sex, their numbers reaching at the height of the season in June to between 12-15 birds. When the laying of eggs begins, the 5+ pairs of crows are hard put to it chasing the male Koels from one neem tree to another and keeping the females away from their (the House Crows') nests. In spite of all this hectic activity on the part of the foster parents, the parasitic female Koels take full advantage of this confused situation and deposit their eggs in the nests of the crows! As already mentioned, the majority of the Koel present results in larger number of their chicks being hatched, but the survival rate is curiously small, as I shall elaborate when dealing with the House Crow. During the last breeding season just one Koel young was reared to maturity. It is a male which left the nest in August 1987, and up to this time (26.2.88) it still begs for food and the foster parents willingly feed it! From what I have observed amongst nidicolous birds, both domesticated cage birds as well as those in the wild, full fledging takes from three weeks to a month; and it takes about a few weeks to a month for the fledgelings to become independent of their parents, and start feeding entirely on their own. I have observed Koel being fed till September-October which in itself has been an abnormality.

Crow-Pheasant or Coucal (*Centropus sinensis*)

Not an indigenous species, but an unfortunate introduction into Kutch over half a century ago. It has spread far and wide, and each garden, depending on its size, has a pair or two of these living in it. I have a pair in my grounds too which raises a brood more than once a year. As soon as the juveniles become independent they leave my premises. The Crow-Pheasant is forever on the lookout for bugs, worms and insect life. However, its most abnoxious habit is to diligently search for birds' nests and to avidly devour eggs and young.

Barn Owl (*Tyto alba*)

Evidently these owls come into my compound at night once in a while. I found a dried up skin some years ago. It appeared that the House Crows had mobbed this bird and pecked it to death. I, of course, collected the mangled and plucked, but recognisable, skin, and sent it to the Bombay Natural History Society, who confirmed my identification.

Eagle-Owl, Great Horned Owl (*Bubo bubo*)

I have heard the unmistakable call of this bird at night more than once while it sat either on my roof or on a nearby neem tree. It has not been seen by me.

Spotted Owlet (*Athene brama*)

A pair of these little owls live under the roof of my neighbour's house. The adults themselves, or at times with their family, when they have juveniles with them, sometimes come very near my house, and on days on which they have overstayed their nocturnal visit, it is fun watching their reactions towards crows, other birds and myself. They keep on bowing or bobbing up and down in their state of alarm and nervousness, all the time uttering their short alarm calls at frequent intervals. They quieten down when they are satisfied that the danger is passed.

Common Indian Nightjar (*Caprimulgus asiaticus*)

Does not visit me any longer. I used to hear one calling in the night on some occasions in the hot weather, but every time I looked for them the next morning in the likely places in my grounds, due to its protective colouration and its habit of sitting still, I never succeeded in spotting it.

House Swift (*Apus affinis*)

Never settles anywhere in my grounds for there are no suitable places for it to sit on or nest in; but I have seen them frequently flying about or soaring overhead.

Whitebreasted Kingfisher (*Halcyon smyrnensis*)

A single bird permanently present, but have never seen its mate which no doubt joins it. One hears its sharp and shrill Kiriri..... or Kil, Kil, Kilili..... call more often than one sees this bird. Though not mentioned in the literature one commonly uses on birds, I have observed its aerial displays, perhaps part of its courtship, which it indulges in by flying overhead at a good height with slow flaps of its wings and uttering a bisyllabic kir, kir or kil, kil.... uttered slowly with gaps between each call, and displaying the beautiful chocolate and blue plumage.

Bluecheeked Bee-eater (*Merops superciliosus*)

More often in the summer than at other seasons, these bee-eaters pass over or circle in the sky above my grounds, advertising their presence up above by their unmistakable calls. Some individuals breed in Kutch during years having good rainfall.

Green Bee-eater (*Merops orientalis*)

One of the common birds in my grounds. They could be seen everywhere, on telephone and electric wires, at vantage points on the protruding twigs or branches of all kinds of trees or hawking insects. With the famine conditions prevailing this year (1987-88) there were more of these birds in my garden than usual, particularly during the post-monsoon and cold weather months when these birds had to put in an extra effort, with the paucity of insect life, to catch their prey species. They even descended to the beds of the fodder crops almost at ground level and launched their sallies on low flying insects from there. Two or three pairs breed outside in the bank of a nala situated just outside my compound wall to the south. An odd pair breeds in my grounds also, and their favourite nesting site is one of the burrows of the Desert Gerbille (*Meriones hurrianae*) - the colonies of which come up in my grounds now and then.

Indian Roller (*Coracias benghalensis*)

Not so regular in its presence now. Formerly a pair used to nest in a hole on the topmost part of the trunk of an old date palm. This palm fell down in a cyclonic storm. The aerobatics of the Indian Roller, part of its courtship display, is quite spectacular. They indulge in rolls, tumbles, rocketing up and nose diving, all executed up in the air, while all the while they utter their peculiar and raucous calls and displaying their plumage and flashing the beautiful hues of blue in the sun.

Yellowfronted Pied Woodpecker (*Picoides maharattensis*)

Also an ex-visitor, having stopped coming to me. Used to attract one's attention at close quarters by its tap-tapping when hammering at a branch or the trunk of a tree, or at times by its peculiar and sharp 'click, r r r r. . ' call. It would fly from one tree to another, settling lower down on a branch working its way upwards supported by the stiffly held tail. Or if it landed on a thicker trunk, it would go upwards in sort of spirals.

Ashycrowned Finch-Lark (*Eremopterix grisea*)

Once again one more bird that has ceased to visit my grounds since more than a decade. This is because of human habitations having increased all round, and also due to the deterioration of its feeding grounds nearby through overgrazing by cattle and sheep which go around in their hundreds as soon as it rains and the green grass sprouts, thus perhaps with the denudation of the land grass seeds and other food available to this lark before are not to be had now.

Dusky Crag Martin (*Hirundo concolor*)

There are no stone ledges or other perching or nesting places either in my house or in the outhouses in my grounds, and hence the birds never alight anywhere. However, I regularly see a pair or a few of these Martins flying up above and hunting insects.

Striated Swallow, or Redrumped Swallow (*Hirundo daurica*)

Often seen by me soaring and circling, but owing to the reasons mentioned above, in connection with the preceding species, they do not settle in my compound).

Golden Oriole (*Oreolus oreolus*)

An odd bird comes in and is at once noticed by its calls. The male utters his melodious song and the female attracts attention by her strange harsh call (sometimes this call is uttered by the male too). They come, stop over for a couple of days and then pass on to some other better wooded garden.

(to be continued)

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The Coto Donana by L.A. Hill, 64 North Parade, Grantham, Lincolnshire NG31 8AN, England.

I wrote to the Estacion Biologica de Donana in Seville suggesting that I lend a hand with their autumn ringing programme on the Coto, and received a favourable reply.

So I set off with the car on the Plymouth to Santander (north of Spain) ferry towards the end of September last year. The crossing takes 24 hours and is followed by a drive of 1000 km. to El Rocio, the village on the edge of the National Park of Donana. The park is situated on the delta of the River Guadalquivir about half way between Seville and Huelva.

Coto means "Hunting Estate" in Spanish, and this particular coto was a favourite hunting ground of Spanish kings and nobles for several centuries. The Dona Ana, after whom it is generally believed the area was named, was the wife of the Duke of Medina Sidonia, Lord High Admiral of the Spanish Armada

The park has an area of about 260 square miles of which roughly half is marsh ("marismas"), dry in the summer and flooded from November to May; one quarter is the littoral zone on the Atlantic Coast, with encroaching sand dunes, scattered stands of mature Stone pines, and a string of fresh water lagoons; and one quarter is stabilized sand tableland, covered with Halimium scrub, woods of both mature and young Stone pines, clumps of tangled bramble thickets and bracken, and isolated Cork oaks.

Required reading for the Coto is Guy Mountfort's "Portrait of a Wilderness" which is an account of the ornithological expeditions to the area in 1952, 56 and 57. In those days, after crossing the river, they had to travel on horseback to get to the old hunting lodge, El Palacio, in the centre of the area.

Things have changed a bit since then, and now there are tarmac roads and a huge modern summer holiday resort on the beach at the north west end of the Coto; it is called Matalascanas, and is much favoured by German tourists.

These days the Coto is divided into three areas:- Reserve, National Park, and Pre-park.

The Reserve, an irregular-shaped area in the centre with El Palacio as its headquarters, is administered by the Estacion Biologica de Donana which comes under the Ministry of Education and Sciences. It was purchased by the Government with a contribution from the World Wildlife Fund in the 1970s, and the general public is not allowed entry. Scientists and post-graduate students conduct studies on Lynx, Wild Boar, Red and Fallow Deer, Mongoose, Imperial Eagle, etc. One girl was studying Barn Owl pellets.

The National Park, which more or less surrounds the Reserve, is administered by ICONA (Instituto para la Conservacion de la Naturaleza) which comes under the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. ICONA has a large tourist office/shop/museum/cafe on the main road a mile inland from Matalascanas, and organises twice daily 4-hour tours around the park. ICONA also administers the national ringing scheme and their rings are stamped "Min. Agric. ICONA-Madrid".

The Pre-park areas are fairly large tracts on the north and east borders and are still privately owned, although the government has imposed limitations on the owners' activities regarding hunting, stripping the bark from the Cork oaks, etc.

Chatting to the locals in the bars of El Rocio over a "cafe-conleche", or while having a haircut in the nearby town of Almonte, one gathers that there is little love lost between them and ICONA.

"Even the shooting of sparrows is prohibited" they say, "and who believes that shooting a few to eat, as we have always done, is going to bring about the extinction of the species?"

ICONA guards are on patrol every night to limit the activities of poachers, "el furtivos", the furtive ones.

Gus (pronounced "goose" in Spanish) Jones, who was just finishing a breeding season study of Booted Eagles, told me he had had problems gaining access into some Pre-park areas, where the private owners' own guards are active and where permission to enter is sometimes difficult to obtain.

The Estacion Biologica had a short-term contract ringer operating in a small copse near El Palacio. One of his jobs was to monitor the fresh water lagoons in the littoral area for colour-ringed Flamingos and Spoonbills, etc: this he did on horseback. I spent my first three days there with him: the main passage migrants at that time were Pied Flycatchers and Garden Warblers (we controlled one of the latter with a Belgian ring).

ICONA then officially allotted me a large area close to El Rocio in the National Park Area, the Estacion Biologica issued me with rings, and I was left to myself.

The site I finally chose was on the edge of a wide reed-covered (and at that time dry) "arroyo", and my headquarters were out of sight down a bank under a wild fig tree. It turned out to be one of the sites used by Edward McKrill who was ringing in that area in 1986 and early 1987, as I came across some of his eucalyptus poles and guy strings, and also re-trapped some of his birds. I had met him in October 1986 when I paid a 2-day visit to El Rocio.

The terrain was all soft loose sand covered with Halimium scrub with a pine wood nearby (much frequented by Azure-winged Magpies), and a stand of tall eucalyptus, and along the edge of the arroyo, dense thickets, dead bracken and low bushes, with a variety of trees including Cork oaks.

Apart from Pied Flycatchers and Garden Warblers, the main passage migrants during the four weeks I was there in October seemed to be Blackcaps, Whitethroats, Redstarts, Stonechats, Whinchats, Reed, Great Reed and Willow Warblers, with Chiffchaffs just starting to come through.

It was exciting for me also to ring Cettis, Fantailed, Melodious Sardinian, Subalpine, Spectacled and Dartford Warblers, Firecrests and Azure-winged Magpies. I did not get too excited at ringing a couple of Longtailed Tits, but was told later that they are relatively rare in that area.

Robins are winter migrants only, and were just beginning to arrive, to the excitement of the locals: they are harbingers of cooler weather and rain, the filling of the "marismas" and the coming of the vast winter flocks of Grebes and other wildfowl.

A Germal girl, Andrea, who was studying for a doctorate at Cologne University, was carrying out a remarkably detailed study on the diet of migratory birds. One of her ringing sites was on the opposite side of the arroyo, but in a very different habitat. Instead of loose sand she had grazing land, typical of the area, with a plentiful supply of trees, and a large variety of shrubs and bushes, many bearing berries. This was a Pre-park area and she had had to obtain permission of entry from the owner.

She gathered up the droppings from under each bird in the nets, put them and the birds into an envelope in the bird bag, and left the bird for one hour to give it time to make further offerings. She would then ring, measure and weigh the bird, estimate its fat count and release it: later, in her lodgings, she would inspect the droppings under the microscope. She was armed with not only a field guide to the birds of Europe but also with field guides to the berries and insects of Europe!

My thanks for permission to ring on the Coto go to Sr. Rafael Cadenas (ICONA) and Srs. Juan Calderon and Luis Garcia (Estacion Biologica). The last-named has been on the staff for the last 16 years: he does not do much in the way of passerine ringing, going in for "quality rather than quantity". He rings the chicks of Flamingo (near Malaga), of Spoonbills (near Huelva), and of other interesting birds such as Imperial Eagle and Red Kites in the Coto, and also waders.

They have recently acquired cannon net apparatus and look forward to catching Griffon vultures on a carcass: they will attach radio transmitters to two of them so that they can be tracked from a small plane.

A word of warning to those wishing to visit that area of Spain: mugging and thefts from cars in Seville and other large towns are common. Even when halted at traffic lights, the rear window can be smashed and suitcases removed from the rear seat.

I used to work at the Rio Tinto mines some 50 miles inland from the Coto. One evening in Huelva, when I was having dinner with a Spanish engineer I had known at the mines, the front door window of my car was broken and the radio/cassette stolen.

All in all it was a most interesting trip, and I would like to return, preferably in the Spring when the birds are on their way back from Africa.

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Bird Life of India by Madhav Gadgil and R.J. Ranjit Daniels, Centre for Ecological Sciences, Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore - 560 012

1. Introduction

We are most grateful to the Indian Academy of Sciences for this honour of asking us to pay a tribute to the memory of the late Dr. Salim Ali. Salim Ali was amongst the most eminent of Indian zoologists; he was also distinguished for his tireless efforts in the cause of nature conservation. His lifelong passion was the diversity of living organisms, especially birds. This is now emerging as a major human concern of our times and a frontier of active scientific research. Although the 9040 species of living birds account for less than a thousandth of the total diversity of biological species, they are by far the best known group of living organisms. Only an average of three new species, and hardly any new genera of birds are now being discovered every year. It may therefore safely be assumed that over 98% of all extant bird species are known to science. In contrast, insects account for the bulk of biological diversity, and while only about one million species are currently known to science, as many as thirty million may exist (Benton, 1987). Birds as the best known group of living organisms have therefore played a vital role in our understanding of the processes affecting biological diversity, and we propose to devote this lecture to reviewing what we know of the bird life of India in the context of this broader framework.

2. Adaptive Radiation of Birds

Beginning in all probability as a single lineage more than 3 billion years ago, the diversity of life on earth has increased over time to an estimated 10 to 30 million species today. The fossil record suggests that the increase has occurred in stages with bursts of increases caused by new radiations punctuated by occasional spasms of extinctions. The new radiations have followed a lineage crossing an ecological threshold into a new adaptive zone, for instance, the colonization of land for the first time by plants. Obviously successful adaptation to life in a new zone poses severe difficulties; if, however, these are overcome, the newly adapted organisms may be able to fare extremely well with relaxed predation and competition pressures. They could then continue to undergo diversification by further adaptation to subzones of the new zone.

Such new adaptive zones may be grounded in novel modes of life made possible by the evolution of other groups of living organisms. Thus origin of land plants in the silurian 430 million years ago opened up a new adaptive zone that led to the evolution of insects. It was the subsequent co-evolution of insects and flowering plants with their mutualistic relationship involving pollination in the cretaceous.

130 million years ago that opened up a brand new adaptive zone for the birds. Originating in the jurassic some 150 million years ago as reptiles that had taken to gliding, perhaps in pursuit of early insects from the tree tops, the birds radiated explosively in the cretaceous seizing on the new rich resources of seeds, pulp, nectar and a plethora of insects. From there they invaded a whole new range of other adaptive subzones. The variety of adaptive types so evolved may be exemplified by Tickell's flowerpecker (*Dicaeum erythrorhynchos*), the smallest of Indian birds, only 8 cm. in length, that feeds on nectar, insects, spiders and berries in deciduous forests and plantations; by the Saras Crane the tallest of Indian birds, standing well over 160 cm in height, and a denizen of the wet grasslands; by the Lesser Florican, a ground-dwelling habitue of the dry grasslands; by the Brownheaded Gull that spends much of its time on wing along the sea-shore; by the Goldenbacked Woodpecker that chisels out insects from under bark in our deciduous forests; and by the Great Horned Owl that prowls at night looking for rats to prey on. The adaptive radiation of birds can indeed be said to have reached its culmination, for birds have evolved to feed on other birds, as is the case with the Logger Falcon. Above all, birds are masters of seeds, fruit, insects, snails, fish and other smaller vertebrates, that they hunt for in the day time. However, apart from a few occasional experiments like the Ceylon Frogmouth (*Bartrochostomus moniliger*) that hawks insects at night in our evergreen forests, the insect and fruit resources of the night have been largely monopolised by the bats.

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(To be continued)

Correspondence:

Blackbacked Woodpecker by M.S. Jayanth, Merlin Nature Club, 13, 8th Cross, 30th Main, Sarakki, I.T.I. Layout, J.P. Nagar 1st Phase, Bangalore - 560 078

I kindly bring to your notice a rare sighting of the Blackbacked Woodpecker (*Chrysocolaptes festinus festinus*) in Bangalore. My friends and members of the Merlin Nature Club, Mr. J.N. Prasad and Mr. Karthikayan, while coming in the 46th Cross, Pipeline Road, near Horticulture Nursery, Jayanagar, on a bright sunny and warm day of November 22nd 1987, saw a pair of woodpeckers on a Gulmohar tree (*Delonix regia*) at about 10 a.m. They were also seen on the silver oak tree next to it. My friends saw that the woodpeckers had a golden back separated by a 'Y' shaped black mark and the upper back dull white. They also had a massive bill. One of the woodpeckers had a red crest and another had a yellow crest. With these observations, it was certain that the pair were not goldenbacked woodpeckers (*Dinopium benghalense benghalense*). Karthikayan aided by a 7 x 35 mm. binoculars identified these birds as the Blackbacked Woodpecker (*Chrysocolaptes festinus festinus*). The one with the red crest was the male and another with the yellow crest, a female. As its distribution was confined to the wooded areas of Western and Eastern Ghats, they considered it as a rare straggler. They observed the birds up to 11 a.m. By the time I came it was already 11.30 a.m. The female woodpecker was still there, but the male was nowhere to be seen. I, also aided with a 7 x 35 mm binoculars observed these birds for half an hour. Later we checked up the distribution of this species in the Synopsis of the Birds of India and Pakistan by Sir S. Dhillon Ripley which says :-

"Range: The Western Ghats from Surat Dangs and Khandesh area in Bombay, south to Kerala, east along the Satpura mountains, thro' Central India, North to Dehra Dun in Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal. Less common on the eastern side of the peninsular, in Forest Biotope foothills and upto 4000 feet."

I thought that this sighting was noteworthy and thus am bringing it to your notice to kindly publish this article in the coming issue of the Newsletter for Birdwatchers.

Editor's Note

Kumar Ghorpade says that last year he saw 2 or 3 blackbacked woodpeckers on his farm. They evidently had bred somewhere in the neighbourhood as the last two sightings were of a pair with two young birds as well.

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Iora and Bird Call by Kumar Ghorpade, P.O. Box 2564, 123 Brigade Road, Bangalore - 560 025

For the past three years I have tried to solicit entry and return to me of a Questionnaire for Birdwatchers, from Indian bird enthusiasts. Some 600 plus letters or post cards and a near equal number of questionnaires have

either been mailed to addresses obtained from the Newsletter for Birdwatchers and other sources, or handed personally, or through regional bird clubs/societies all over India. This was towards the commencement of the publications referred to above, which, I felt, were grossly needed by the birdwatching community in our country.

Last year, the late Dr. Salim Ali mailed me the following response to my proposed publications and gave his personal opinion on their need:

"Thank you for your letter of 25th March regarding the launching of your new ornithological journal Iora. Personally I feel that at this time there is very little need for a brand new scientific journal; nor has ornithology advanced enough in the country to have room for yet another journal on birds. On the other hand, in my opinion it would be ideal if you could revitalize the Newsletter for Birdwatchers, transforming it along the lines you propose for Iora, widening its scope and giving it a firmer scientific base. Since the Newsletter has been going on for over 20 years, the advantage here would be the already established set of enthusiastic subscribers and contributors, the lack of which (together with finance) is the usual stumbling block of most publications of this type. Let me know what you feel about this. "

At that time I had replied that I was hopeful of a response from Indian and foreign birdwatchers that would justify the need for a new journal. However, the results so far have belied my "wishful thinking" and clearly corroborated the experienced viewpoint of a "master" that was Dr. Salim Ali. A total of only 106 completed questionnaires, Rs.889/- as subscriptions, and four manuscripts, received up until now demonstrates poor support for my time, effort, money spent, and misplaced enthusiasm!

Postponing inauguration of Iora and Bird Call for the next decade or so when our birdwatchers have graduated sufficiently to need (and ask for and contribute towards!) them, I am now going ahead only with the book - Indian Birdwatchers Directory and Guide - using whatever information and completed questionnaires I receive through 1988. I solicit your support. Those who have paid Rs.50/- for Iora will be sent a copy of this book, though the price tag is expected to be much higher.

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A Comment on Dudda Gubbi Birds by Kumar Ghorpade, P.O. Box 2563, 123 Brigade Road, Bangalore - 560 025

I cannot help mentioning that in a recent issue your record of the Mottled Wood Owl (Strix ocellata) was very interesting as I have not seen or heard it here so far. Few months ago there was a pair of Great Horned Owls (Bubo bubo) sleeping in the big mango tree in Kunhi Raman's compound. And in the last few days the call of the Collared Scops Owl (Otus bakkamoena) is heard

after dusk. I am thinking of doing an annotated checklist of Dodda Gubbi birds (possibly Bangalore City and environs birds too?), observed by me during the past 25 years, for your Newsletter if you would like that. How the years pass!

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In Search of a Tern by Prof. H. Daniel Wesley, 126 Ramalinga Nagar South, Tiruchirapalli - 620 017

On 9th October 1987, during the peak migration of birds over the peninsular India, a colleague of mine at College told me that he had been to Mukkombu for a week-end picnic the previous week and was thrilled at seeing about a hundred birds flying over the running waters and at the sluices. He described the birds as being of the size of a crow or pigeon, dark all over with a darker head, swiftly winging over the waters, now twisting and turning, now hovering and diving, only to emerge often without anything in the bills. Sure, it must have been a tern. But it was to be dark all over. And I began searching the available books and bird encyclopedias. Excited at the description of the Black Tern (*Chlidonias niger*) fitting that by the colleague, I was anxious to visit the area to have a look at it.

Reaching the picnic spot paying the fare at the gate, birdwatching entered a new phase. What had looked empty of birds turned quite lively; I was transfixed. Sitting on the river bed about 250 metres from the head of the island was an assortment of avian species, though much less in number. There were: 25 Painted Stork (*Mycteria leucoccephala*), 420 Spoon Bill (*Platalea leucoradia*), 50 or more Little Egret (*Egretta garzetta*), 60 or more Blackwinged Stilt (*Himantopus himantopus*), more than a hundred Blue-winged Teals (*Anas querquedula*), and 23 Grey Heron (*Ardea cinerea*). Flying about over the waters were: 5 Indian river terns, 8 black bellied terns and 14 little egrets, 11 of them at the sluices of the new bridge. The fact that the Black Tern was not in evidence was disappointing indeed. But Monday brought me relief. Back at college the colleague showed me a picture of the tern that he said he had observed at Mukkombu; it was none other than the river tern. The lesson re-learned, was that one could not rely for identification on the verbal colour description. Nevertheless, it was a thrill to have taken the trouble of going over to the place and seen and known that the river is on the migration route of the birds.

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Whitebrowed Blue Flycatcher by J. Hemanth, S/o L. Jagannath, No.55/71 H.B. Samaja Road, Basavanagudi, Bangalore - 560 004

We, J. Hemanth (17 years) and M.S. Jayanth (14 years) are glad to say that we had the luck of adding a new record for Bangalore City. The record was of sighting a female Whitebrowed Blue Flycatcher (*Muscicapa supercilialis supercilialis*). I request you to kindly publish the following matter in the Newsletter for Birdwatchers.

On the 2nd of January 1988, we went on a casual birdwatching stroll to the M.N. Krishna Rao park in Basavanagudi area which is nearby our house. The time was about noon and there seemed to be poor birdlife. But while passing a young *Tabebuia* tree (about 10 ft. high), we sighted a very small bird (Sunbird =) at the top of it. At first sight, its looks and habits confirmed it to be a Flycatcher and we paid little attention when we assumed it to be a Brown Flycatcher (*Muscicapa latirostris*). But when it turned its back to us, we saw what was an azure blue tail, mousy grey upper parts, white under parts, glistening white breast, reddish (or pinkish?) bill and black legs. Then we realised that it was a different species. After consulting bird guides, we identified it as the Whitebrowed Blue Flycatcher (*Muscicapa supercilialis supercilialis*). Its habits were not appreciably different from those of other flycatchers. We also heard its calls - mousy and feeble squaks and a throaty Tr-r-r-r (Handbook of Birds of India and Pakistan, Vol.7). However, we could not see much of the bird as it vanished into the thick undergrowth beyond the barbed wire enclosure. Efforts to search for it again proved futile. Though the identification was correct, we cannot expect it to be called an authentic record because there is no concrete evidence. We had no cameras or binoculars at that time, except a note book and pen. But we were a good 10-12 ft. from the bird. Mistaken identity cannot arise here as we were in good light and checked Salim Ali's books.

Coming to the wintering of the species, the "Handbook of Birds of India and Pakistan, Vol.7" and "A Synopsis of the Birds of India and Pakistan" both say that this species occasionally winters in south-east Karnataka and west Tamil Nadu. But there seems to be no record from Bangalore City as we came to know from some senior birdwatchers and a checklist of birds. About habitat, "A Pictorial Guide to the Birds of the Indian Subcontinent" says that this species of bird inhabits/frequents open deciduous forest, groves, gardens and orchards.

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Golden Brown Jungle Crow by A.R.H. Bilu Imam, "The Grove", Hazaribagh - 825 301 (Bihar)

On Sunday the 8th November 1987, at about 11 a.m. in the morning, my wife and I had gone to the lower garden in our countryside home, "The Grove", which is on the north eastern outskirts of Hazaribagh town in Bihar. The Canary hill and its protected jungles are less than a mile to our east. I noticed a few crows perched on a gulmohur tree having been disturbed by the servant boys whom we had sent up a date palm tree where the birds had been drinking the toddy from the earthen gharas. All of a sudden among the higher branches of the tree a brownish gold bird alighted from somewhere with flashing wings. Upon looking at it closely I identified it as a brown to gold coloured crow. Its wings extended flashing a pure golden colour in the feathers of the outer secondaries and greater wing coverts. It was most beautiful to behold

On the branches of the same tree sat three normal grey and black house crows (although in my compound which is a big grove of trees there are also several jungle crows), which looked a little drugged due to the date palm toddy which they had been drinking. The golden-brown bird seemed the only

alert one, and did not look as if it had been drinking toddy, perhaps because the others teased it off. The other crows noted its arrival in the tree but continued to sit apart from it as if deliberately as the bird jumped from branch to branch. In flight the bird struck me as being heavier above the back and scapular region than the other crows. Also the nape of its neck was fuller like a jungle crow. It had a thick plumage behind the head. The bird sat apart selfconsciously about fifteen or twenty feet from the other crows which neither avoiding it purposely nor teasing it, continued to maintain a respectable distance from it, although it was plainly one of their company. The bird sat alert and full of life but with its head held rather more forward with its weight ahead, as if about to fly off or creak. For an instant it resembled a crow-pheasant attitude. A little later it flew from the tree alone, with deep, full strokes, its wings shining a bright gold in the sun. The upper parts of the back and wings were heavily rounded in flight and reminded me of a seagull. The upper face of the outer secondaries caught the sun and glistened with a very bright, burnished glow in the sharp sunlight. After flying about 150 yards, keeping high in the air all the time, the crow entered a grove of teak trees. By now I had decided it was a specimen that I wanted to collect so I went off and brought my .22 rifle. On approaching the trees I noticed its movement in the upper branches of one of the trees. It was then on a high branch leaning out forward with its head held low as crows do when crowing. I thought it was about to fly off, but it maintained this position as I quickly brought up the rifle and killed it. In the scope I saw its head held low and stretched out unlike a house crow. On a branch twenty feet from it sat a normal house crow. It fell dead to my shot. I must say it did give me a good chance to kill it, and was not as cautious as one would have expected a crow to be, as it had been aware of my taking aim on it.

The other crow flew off to the shot and there was no noisy demonstration by the other crows as would have normally been expected if you killed one of their kind. From this I infer that these other crows were not closely identified with it. The brown crow uttered no noise that I may have noted.

Upon examination it indeed was a crow. It was a uniform brownish gold in colour all over, the upper wings, back, rump, upper tail coverts, and upper rectrices all being a light brownish gold. The head, nape, and breast were a slightly duller shade. The undersides from breast to abdomen were uniformly a dirty coffee colour. The throat hackles were lighter in the inside and darker towards the tips. The eyes were a dark grey in death, and the cutting beak rather lighter and narrower than the ordinary raven. The legs were thinner and finer in build than the ordinary house crow, and the general overall body size was that of an ordinary crow, although the plumage was more decidedly fluffed out and not sleek like the house crow but more like a jungle crow. It was as described, a bright golden brown on the upper parts of the body with a slight dirtiness to coffee brown on the under-sides. There was no trace of black or grey unless the coffee-colour could be said to hold a blackness. Upon dissection, the meat was clean and possessed no unpleasant odour. The 40 grain bullet had entered at the junction of the right leg with the body, breaking out through the left humerus. I carefully removed its skin and salted it to preserve it. Several colour photos were taken before this. Unfortunately, measurements of the wing span, body length, weight, etc. were not taken, but size was estimated as identical to an ordinary crow, the bird simply looking heavier due to its fluffed plumage.

Later I was to identify it as the large, bow-beaked *Corvus macrorhynchos* *macrorhynchos*, a jungle crow, and a bird of the forests. These birds inhabit large groves. The call is a loud and raucous caw-caw. What is of interest is that it was in the company not of jungle crows, but of the common house crow, the sleek and grey-black *Corvus splendens*. In the Bombay Natural History Journal, Vol.VII, No.2, an entry dated 20th September 1906, at page 519, states that a specimen of *Corvus splendens* resided in the compound of Mr. Justice Woodruffe in Russel Street, Calcutta, and was a light brown colour throughout except for its ashy neck. The wings shone bronze in the sun. It was persecuted by other crows. This was a house crow, not a jungle crow. Further to this, I sent a specimen of the crow which I had collected to Mr. Humayun Abdulali of the B.N.H.S. It might be of interest to note that on page 519 of the Journal noted above, mention is also made to a brown and white crow shot by Rev. L. Kraig, S.J. in Versova, Bombay. Mr. Abdulali on studying the specimen felt that on measurements it was a Jungle Crow (wings 295, bill 60.7, tar .44, tail 155 mm.) and informed me the BNHS collection has one which is almost pure white. He said albinism in crows appears to show as brown (which is a form of white), or "golden". He has not seen any other form.

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Birds on Lalbagh Tank by S. Theodore Baskaran, 124 Ashoka Pillar Road,
1st Block, Jayanagar, Bangalore - 560 011

I have been observing the birdlife in the lake inside Lalbagh for the past two years. The lake offers a delightful ornithological spectacle every winter.

The southern portion of this tank has been fenced off. Though a footpath runs around the lake, people do not go this side of the garden and so this area is comparatively undisturbed. It is in this portion of the lake that the birds congregate. Throughout the year, certain species can be seen here ... paddy birds, night herons, dabchicks, purple moorhen, moorhen, whitebreasted water hen and coots. Both coots and dabchicks breed here. A few months back, the water hyacinth plants in this part of the lake were removed in a cleaning process and purple moorhen and moorhen were no more to be seen.

The scene got dramatic this winter with the arrival of a thousand Gargany teals. In the beginning of winter - in September - they arrived and confined themselves to the fenced-off area. Slowly they ventured out of this area and by February, the teals came quite close to the bund on the northern side which is frequented by hundreds of joggers and walkers in the mornings. There were a few common sandpipers and a flock of black-winged stilts also. But it was the Gargany which dominated the show. There was a lot of activity in the evenings. The teals were feeding noisily and when it was not quite dark yet, the night herons arrived and took positions.

The first batch of Gargany teals left on the 8th of April. A small batch stayed on till 14th. When I went there the next day morning, none was left.

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Birds in Euvalyptus by H.N. Mathur, Managing Director, Tripura Rehabilitation, Plantation Corporation Ltd., Bijay Kumar Chowmuhan, Agartala - 799 001, Tripura West

I was happy to see the article titled 'Birds in Eucalyptus at Agartala' by H.N. Mathur and Debashish Chakraborty, published in the Newsletter for Birdwatchers (Vol. XXVIII, No.3 & 4, March-April 88) wherein the para relating to classification of birds on the basis of tree usage was missing. I shall request you kindly to include birds on the basis of tree usage since it indicates that a large number of birds use eucalyptus, flowers, fruits, leaves, as food. Apart from using it for resting, idling, launching site, etc.

In the earlier issue of the Newsletter you have mentioned about the publication of Tripura Nature News. Our thanks for this publicity and for bringing our efforts to the notice of your readers. In the last issue you had also wished that Foresters show more concern about the avian fauna in the plantations. If you kindly spell what you wish the Foresters to do, I shall try to bring it to the notice of Foresters in Tripura through Tripura Nature News, and maybe through Indian Forester, Van-Vigyan & Chital, if these journals agree to publish.

Magpie robins are very common at Agartala and one can hear their song on and often. The magpie robin is a very early riser and one could hear it call even at 4 a.m. as I did today (24.5.88), 4.20, 4.25 is rather common. I wonder if she is an early riser at other places too.

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Nostalgia for India by L.A. Hill, 64 North Parade, Grantham, Lincolnshire NG31 8AN, England

I had many feelings of nostalgia for India recently, as I had been asked to write my reminiscences of Bolani for their souvenir, and had been reading through my diaries. It brought back your visit, when you pointed out that the bird I had fondly imagined was a Fairy Bluebird was actually the Malabar Whistling Schoolboy. Also the first Pheasant-tailed Jacanas I ever saw was when I was with you there!

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A New Source of Food for Cattle Egrets by Satish Kumar Sharma, Forest Extension Officer, Van Chetna Kendra, Gulab Bagh, Udaipur - 313 001

In issue of the Newsletter of March-April 1988, I read T.V. Jose's article "A new source of food for cattle egrets" with great interest. I am of the opinion that he is right in saying that cattle egrets (*Bubulcus ibis*) appear to have found out a new source of food for their survival.

I have seen three times many cattle egrets feeding upon flies from a very close distance, in two cities of Rajasthan State. First time on 9.6.86. I saw

a flock of cattle egrets catching flies on a carcass of domestic cat which was killed in a road accident near Civil Police Lines, Udaipur. Second time on 3.2.87. I again saw a flock of cattle egrets catching flies on and around a decaying dead body of a dog in Jaipur city near Jalmahal Jheel. Third time on 13.3.87. I again saw many cattle egrets feeding on buzzing flies near a butchery where buffaloes were slaughtered for carnivorous captive animals of the Udaipur Zoo.

It is clear from the above examples that cattle egrets show a departure for adaptability to survive in adverse conditions of food scarcity.

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